

interpretation

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Volume 13 number 1

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An Interpretation of Plato's *Euthyphro*

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IV. Second Definition: What is Dear to the Gods is Holy (6e10–9e9)

Euthyphron now offers his second definition: What is dear to the gods (τὸ τοῖς θεοῖς προσφιλέξ, 6e10) is holy, and what is not dear to them is unholy. Socrates seems to be delighted with this answer, and he suggests that it is the very one he was looking for. However, Socrates goes on to say, he does not yet know whether the answer is true. But surely, he continues, Euthyphron will teach him why it is true. "Of course," replies the prophet. Socrates suggests that they first examine what the statement means. He then advances two propositions. The god-beloved (θεοφιλέξ, 7a7) thing and human being are holy, whereas the god-hated (θεομισέξ, 7a8) thing and human being are unholy. Moreover, the holy and the unholy are not the same but most opposite to each other. Euthyphron accepts these statements as suitable formulation of his views.

What does Socrates accomplish by reformulating Euthyphron's definition? First, he improves the definition from a logical standpoint. The prophet confused contraries with contradictories. If what is dear to the gods is holy, what is not dear to them need not be unholy; it may merely be not holy. In its original version, Euthyphron's answer reflected his hostility to the many; for most men are presumably not dear to the gods. Second, Socrates enlarges the scope of the inquiry. Nearly all religionists suppose that what is loved or hated by the gods must be holy or unholy. Equally common is the assumption that holy actions cannot also be unholy. This view would be correct if things are holy or unholy because they "participate" in one of two distinct "forms." By examining that view, Socrates will be able to test indirectly whether there is a paradigmatic "idea" of holiness. Finally, by making explicit Euthyphron's belief that human beings as well as actions or things can be dear to the gods, Socrates points to another facet of the prophet's psychological makeup.

We have already seen that Euthyphron is a lover of justice; it should be clear by now that he is also a lover of the gods. In general, men cannot help imitating what they ardently admire.¹ Euthyphron is a case in point. He admires the gods too much merely to obey them. Soaring admiration, zealous devotion, and religious enthusiasm are all manifestations of ἔρωξ or passionate love.² Ἐρωξ is born of an awareness of one's imperfection, insufficiency, or neediness. Since it is a desire for something needed and lacking, it is essentially outward looking. It

1. Plato, *Republic* 377e–378b; 500c–d.

2. Plato, *Phaedrus* 244b–e.

fixes the attention of the self on things other than self. In moments of peak intensity, it may produce those states of the soul called ecstatic. When ἔρωσ is moved by a sense of imperfection, it is also upward looking. The lover puts things and persons on pedestals; he idealizes. It is in a state of ecstasy that the prophet “beholds” the highest or divine things.

Ἔρωσ frequently plays the “lying poet,” lending the color of nobility to baseness, morality to immorality. Euthyphron sees only justice in Zeus’ parricide and usurpation, much as a romantic lover may adore as a goddess a woman whose charms are commonplace or worse. And as ἔρωσ can find perfection where none exists, so too can it invent perfect beings which exist only in the lover’s imagination. Ἔρωσ is a god-forming power.

The lover seeks to lose his separate identity in union with the beloved. Similarly, the mystic attempts to transcend selfhood in oneness with god. But the lover cannot be united with the beloved unless he is loved in return. If his need is great enough, he may convince himself he is loved when in fact he is not. In Euthyphron’s case, the self-deception is unavoidable, as there are no gods at hand to disillusion him.

But let us assume Euthyphron is every inch the prophet and wise man he claims to be, and let it further be assumed that the gods love wisdom. Still, since his wisdom is a divine gift, he cannot legitimately take credit for it. Strictly speaking, it is not his at all. Euthyphron thus has no virtue of his own that could make him dear to the gods. Or would they love him for the knowledge they gave to him? We are reminded of Machiavelli’s quip that Moses is to be esteemed for that Grace which made him worthy of so great a preceptor.³ The equivocal status of the prophet’s virtue is rooted in a more general problem: the dubiousness of rational self-esteem in a world ruled by beneficent gods. Later in the dialogue Socrates will say that all good things come from the gods (15a1–2). If this pious platitude were simply true, men could not reasonably take pride in anything they do.

Socrates now undertakes to break down Euthyphron’s resolve to prosecute his father. Throughout the remainder of the dialogue, Socrates will try to make the prophet feel that he cannot justify his action in the eyes of gods and men. In the present section, he exposes a massive contradiction in the prophet’s view of the holy, and, at the same time, suggests that his lawsuit may be hateful to some of the gods. In short, he attempts to make Euthyphron doubtful of his wisdom and divine support. An outline of Socrates’ argument follows:

(1) Euthyphron defined the holy as the god-beloved, and the unholy as the god-hated. He also said the gods disagree, quarrel, and make war upon each other (7b2–4). (2) He further supposes that the gods quarrel and fight because they hold conflicting views of justice or morality (7b5–d10). (3) Since in his

3. *The Prince* ch. 6.

4. Plato, *Republic* 522c, 602d.

opinion the gods love what they believe moral and hate what they believe immoral, he must admit that what is dear to some gods may be hateful to others (7e1–8a6). (4) It thus appears that the same things may be both holy and unholy, contrary to what Euthyphron said earlier. Therefore, even if his lawsuit is dear to Zeus, it may be hateful to Cronos, Uranos, and Hera—deities who suffered at the hands of their offspring—and possibly to other gods as well (8a7–d6).

Before turning to Euthyphron's response, we must consider each step of Socrates' argument more closely.

1. Socrates refrains from pointing out a mischievous consequence of Euthyphron's position. If what is hateful to the gods is unholy, and they feel enmity and hatred for each other, it follows that the gods themselves are unholy.

2. When Euthyphron affirms that the gods disagree with one another and fight, Socrates asks him what kind of disagreement causes enmity and anger. He then explains that if the two of them were to disagree about the number, size, or weight of certain objects, they would not on that account become enemies and angry at each other. And the reason, he gives Euthyphron to understand, is that they could easily resolve their dispute by means of counting, measuring, or weighing the objects in question. Socrates does not mention that those skills, especially counting, are the foundation of all artful procedure or rational know-how.⁴ He implies that knowledge is the ground of genuine concord, whereas ignorance is productive of contention and strife. It might be objected that enlightenment sometimes fosters enmity by revealing previously hidden conflicts of interest. Against this objection one could argue that insofar as men seek truth, their interests are identical.⁵

Socrates now returns to the question he just asked. A disagreement about matters of what kind causes enmity and anger? Since Euthyphron has no ready answer, Socrates offers one of his own: "The just and the unjust and noble and base and good and bad." He goes on to suggest that men become enemies only when they disagree about those matters or are unable to reach an adequate judgment concerning them. To this Euthyphron strongly assents. He naively assumes that all conflicts arise from differences regarding "values," whereas in fact most conflicts presuppose agreement as to "values."⁶ The importance of getting rich is a principle on which the bank president and the bank robber concur. Euthyphron's naiveté is traceable to his other-worldly ambition, which removes him from the mundane competition for scarce goods.

In the statement quoted above, Socrates uses the definite article before "just" and "unjust," but not before "noble," "base," "good," or "bad." The effect is to create a composite "morality," on the one hand, and "immorality," on the other, while giving due emphasis to the primacy of justice as an element of the former, and of injustice as an ingredient of the latter. This mode of expression nicely

5. Plato, *Republic* 350a.

6. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* II.6.17–21.

reflects Euthyphron's moral consciousness. Even as he confuses piety with justice, so he does not clearly distinguish the just from either the noble or the good.

Socrates asks next whether the gods, too, disagree about moral matters, assuming they disagree at all. "For presumably they wouldn't quarrel with each other," he remarks, "unless they differed about those things." Euthyphron emphatically agrees, no doubt because he feels it would be unworthy of the gods to fight over anything less exalted than the principles of justice or morality.

Now if the gods knew what justice is, they could not disagree about it, for truth is one. The agreement of all knowers, in virtue of the identity of the things known, was the point of Socrates' examples concerning the arts of counting, measuring, and weighing. Does Socrates imply that the Olympians, if truly divine, could assign an exact numerical value to the justice of any action or human being? We may speculate that the inability to achieve mathematical certainty in regard to the just, the noble, and the good is a defining limitation of merely human intelligence.⁷

Knowledge, in the strict sense, is the apprehension of that which cannot be otherwise.⁸ When we know why something must be so, we may be said to know it scientifically. From this it follows that only things which are invariable can be objects of scientific knowledge. Following Socrates, let us call the objects of rational inquiry "ideas." Now if the "ideas" are prior to the gods, they preclude disagreement among the gods, who can be presumed perfect in their apprehension of the "ideas." But if the gods make the "ideas," they are bound to disagree, nor can they find a nonarbitrary basis for resolving their differences. For with no independent or pre-existing standards to guide their making, the gods must act in ignorance. Each deity will define good and evil according to its likes and dislikes, loves and hates. Because they create out of blind desire, the gods will clash; they will fight. The belief in warring gods thus presupposes the priority of the gods to the "ideas." The questioning of that priority by the philosophers is the deepest cause of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy.⁹

3. In response to Socrates' next question, Euthyphron affirms that each god loves what he considers moral and hates what he considers immoral. Earlier he said that Cronos unjustly devoured his sons (6a1). Did Cronos act from a sincere, if misguided, devotion to justice? So convinced is Euthyphron of his own righteousness, and so desirous is he of being loved by the gods, that he transforms them into lovers of justice. However much they disagree, they all fight for the right.

4. Socrates proceeds to draw the consequences of the statements Euthyphron has accepted. If the gods love what they believe just and hate what they believe unjust, but some consider just what others consider unjust, then the same things

7. Consider Plato, *Republic* 587d10–e3, in light of 546a1–d3.

8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139^b17–24.

9. Plato, *Republic* 597b3–d5. This part of my interpretation borrows from an unpublished lecture on the *Euthyphro* by Leo Strauss.

are dear and hateful to the gods. Thus, according to Euthyphron's definition, the same things are holy and unholy. Socrates therefore complains that Euthyphron has not answered his question. For he did not ask to be told what same thing happens to be both holy and unholy. But what is god-beloved may also be god-hated, as it seems. In fact, it would not be surprising, Socrates says in conclusion, if Euthyphron's suit were dear to Zeus but hateful to Cronos and Uranos, and pleasing to Hephaestus but hateful to Hera; and if any of the other gods disagree about it, the same will hold for them.

Socrates has accomplished both more and less than one might at first suppose. He has not refuted the common view that what is dear to the gods is holy. However, he has shown, on the basis of traditional Homeric theology, that what is dear to one god may be hateful to another, and hence that there is nothing god-beloved in itself. This means "the holy" is a unity only in name, or that there are as many "forms" of holiness as there are gods who differ in their loves and hates. The holy and the unholy "are not the same but most opposite" (7a8–9) only in relation to the same god. For that "by which" holy things are holy (6d10–11) is not an *εἶδος* but divine love, which is always the love of a particular deity, whose affections may be contradictory to those of other deities. An intelligible archetype or common character of all holy things does not exist. In short, the "idea" of holiness is altogether a piece of fiction.

The immediate problem Socrates has brought to light is practical rather than theoretical. If one believes a certain action would be dear to Zeus but hateful to Hera, which deity should one try to please? Should one gratify the most powerful god or coalition of gods, or the most just god or coalition? Tradition is of no help in answering these questions.

At the conclusion of his argument, Socrates mentioned Uranos, Cronos, Zeus, Hera, and Hephaestus. He thereby reminds us that the Olympians are either parents, children, or both. The deities of the poetic tradition are within the realm of genesis. New gods may arise who supplant the old. The capriciousness of the gods is proverbial, and the impermanence of their attachments is presupposed in every attempt to win divine favor through sacrifice and prayer. It would therefore seem impossible for men to know that the ancestral ways remain dear to the ancestral gods, or that the ancestral gods are the present gods. The traditional mode of inquiring about divine things is prophecy. But if prophets disagree as to whether the commandment to honor one's parents takes precedence over the commandment to avenge injustice, how should the dispute be resolved?¹⁰ Again, it becomes necessary to think for oneself and to pursue wisdom as best one can.

Euthyphron denies his lawsuit could be hateful to any of the gods. One thing the gods do not disagree about, he assures Socrates, is that someone who kills unjustly must pay the penalty. The Greek expression for "pay the penalty"

10. On the possibility of disagreement among religious authorities, consider Plato, *Laws* 871c.

(*διδόναι δίκην*) literally means “render what is due” or “give justice.”¹¹ In effect, Euthyphron argues that the gods must be on his side because it is just to avenge injustice; he assumes that his lawsuit is indubitably and unmistakably just. Socrates will now try to make him recognize that the situation is a good deal more complicated, and that he does not know how to prove the justice of his cause.

Earlier we saw that Euthyphron’s view of conflict among the gods reflects a naive view of conflict among men. He now contends that none of the gods denies injustice should be punished. Socrates apparently suspects that this opinion too is based on a confusion about human things, for he asks whether Euthyphron has ever heard men argue that someone who kills unjustly or does anything else unjustly should not pay the penalty. Euthyphron responds that they never cease disputing these things both in the courts and elsewhere: “Since they commit all manner of unjust deeds, they do and say everything to avoid the penalty.” Euthyphron answers as if he thought persons accused of wrongdoing defend themselves by denying that crime should be punished. In fact, it is because he has never heard men dispute the legitimacy of punishing criminals that he cannot imagine the gods disputing it. However, he has heard people say it is unholy for a son to prosecute his father for murder (4e1). And do not these persons argue in effect that someone who kills unjustly must not pay the penalty? Like some other prophets of whom history or legend tell us, Euthyphron views mankind as mired in sin; he is a misanthrope (cf. 3d7). Ironically, the sinfulness he detects everywhere and loathes is that unreasoning preference for one’s own which forms no small part of piety.

Socrates continues to question Euthyphron about the behavior of human beings. He wonders whether they confess to wrongdoing, and while confessing it, nonetheless claim they ought not to pay the penalty. Euthyphron strongly denies this. Socrates then observes that men do not say “quite” everything, since they do not dare argue that if they really are guilty of wrongdoing, they must not pay the penalty; rather, they claim they have done nothing wrong. Euthyphron thinks this is true. Socrates then concludes that men do not dispute whether wrongdoing should be punished, though they may dispute who the wrongdoer is, what he did, and when. Again Euthyphron agrees. Three times Socrates has led him to affirm that all men acknowledge the fundamentals of criminal justice. He is attempting to make Euthyphron less fanatic by disabusing him of the notion that the many are enemies of justice.

Socrates returns to the subject of gods. He wonders whether they too dispute the facts on which guilt and innocence depend, “if indeed they quarrel about what is just and unjust, as you say, and accuse each other of wrongdoing.” For surely, he continues, no one, god or human being, dares to say that he who does injustice should not pay the penalty. Euthyphron thinks this is true, “at least in

11. Plato, *Gorgias* 476a8–10.

the main.” He is not totally convinced, and with some justification. Every criminal declares by his actions that he does not regard the rules of justice as binding upon himself. Euthyphron is aware of this, but he does not clearly distinguish between what men say publicly and what they silently think¹² (perhaps because his own public speech is dictated by inaudible inner voices). For obvious reasons a criminal on the witness stand will not express his contempt for justice. But why should a god be so constrained? Glaucon thought a man who could make himself invisible and so commit crimes with impunity would be as a god among humans.¹³ To judge from the horror stories which Euthyphron accepts as gospel truth, the Olympians offer no safe and sure solution to the problem of who shall guard the guardians.

Elaborating on the point he just made, Socrates now submits that in questions of crime and punishment, the disputants, whether gods or men, “if indeed gods have disputes,” argue about the particulars of the situation, since it is these which determine whether a given action is just or unjust. Euthyphron concurs, whereupon Socrates issues an abrupt challenge. He demands to know what proof Euthyphron has that every god believes a man dies unjustly who, while serving as a field hand, becomes a murderer, is bound by the master of the person he killed, and then perishes from his bonds before the man who bound him could learn from the Interpreters what ought to be done; and that on behalf of such a fellow it is right (*ὀρθῶς*, 9a8) for a son to prosecute and denounce his father for murder. “Come on,” Socrates exhorts him, “try to show me at all clearly that all the gods absolutely believe this action is right (*ὀρθῶς*, 9b2); and if you show me adequately, I shall never stop singing your praises for wisdom.”

Socrates has challenged Euthyphron to prove that his lawsuit is “right,” that is, right in the circumstances, and could not appear otherwise to the gods. If Euthyphron makes the attempt and fails, Socrates could probably convince him he has no chance of winning in court and should therefore abandon his lawsuit. If the prophet succeeds, on the other hand, he will have demonstrated the sameness of reason, human and divine. He will thus have shown that men can know what is right without the help of divine revelation. Socrates would never stop praising him for wisdom.

Euthyphron declines to accept Socrates’ challenge. He could exhibit the proof quite clearly if he wanted to, he claims, but the whole business is too involved to go into just now. “I understand,” Socrates replies, “you think I’m duller than the judges, since you obviously will show them that [your father’s deeds] are unjust and that all the gods hate such things.” Euthyphron does not deny that he considers Socrates unintelligent; but perhaps he holds this opinion partly because Socrates has suggested it. If Socrates is duller than the judges, yet raises questions concerning the gods and justice which Euthyphron cannot answer, would it not

12. On this distinction, cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.19.

13. Plato, *Republic* 360b3–c2.

be advisable for the prophet to stay out of court? And if he takes Socrates for a dullard, will he not lose interest in the conversation and leave of his own accord? Socrates never loses sight of his dual practical intention.

Euthyphron asserts he will persuade the judges, “if indeed” they listen to what he says. Socrates assures him they will listen, “if indeed” they think he speaks well. “But while you were speaking,” he adds slyly, “a thought came to me and I reckoned with myself.” Even if he could be sure that all the gods consider the laborer’s death unjust, Socrates explains, he would not know anything more about what is holy and unholy. The death might very well be god-hated; but a while ago it came to light that the holy and unholy cannot be defined on that basis. For what is god-hated appeared to be god-beloved as well.

Socrates seems to suggest that the gods’ opinions and passions are irrelevant to the determination of what is holy—a view he will introduce explicitly in the next section. The thought behind Socrates’ “thought” appears to be something like the following. Euthyphron supposes that any unjust deed must be hateful to the gods and therefore unholy. He would be right if: (1) the holy is always just, (2) the gods know what justice is, and (3) they love justice and hate injustice. But all three of these assumptions have been rendered questionable by the argument of the dialogue to this point. Thus even if Euthyphron could prove that all the gods hate his father’s deed and consider it unjust, he would not have taught Socrates anything further about the holy.

Having failed to make Euthyphron recognize that he cannot convincingly defend the justice of his lawsuit, Socrates resumes his criticism of the prophet’s definition. He grants for the sake of argument that all the gods hate the laborer’s death and believe it to be unjust. He then proposes an amended definition: What all the gods love is holy, and what all hate is unholy, but what some love and others hate is neither or both.

The new definition seems to imply that, other things being equal, an action increases in holiness with the number of gods who love it. There is strength in numbers, but also in size and weight. Must Euthyphron be able to count, measure, and weigh the gods arrayed on different sides of a dispute in order to make good his claim to have precise knowledge of what is holy and unholy (cf. 7b5–c8)? Or would it be sufficient for him to know the will of Zeus (cf. 5e6)? Homer’s Zeus once declared that if all the other divinities held fast to a golden cord let down from Olympus, and pulled until their strength was spent, they could not drag him from the sky to the ground; yet he, whenever so minded, could haul them up along with the earth and the sea.¹⁴

Socrates asks if Euthyphron wants to define the holy in the manner just suggested. The prophet responds with a bored ‘Why not?’ (*τί γάρ κωλύει*: 9d6). To him the discussion has become purely ‘academic.’ He sees no connection between his own well-being and clarity about the subject that most concerns him.

14. Homer, *Iliad* 8.5–27.

When he nonchalantly grants that the amended definition is correct, Socrates gently calls him to account. Should they examine this definition also, to see whether it is well-stated? Or should they let it pass and accept offhand both their own statements and those of others, agreeing that something is so if someone merely says it is? Or must one inquire into what the speaker says? "One must inquire," the prophet concedes. But it is one thing to disparage what the many say, another to question inner voices no one else can hear. When the Delphic oracle proclaimed him the wisest of all, Socrates undertook to refute the god.¹⁵ We may therefore surmise that if the entire host of Olympus told him that what all the gods love is holy, Socrates would put to them the same question he proceeds to ask Euthyphron: Is the holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because they love it?

V. Is the Holy Loved by the Gods because it is Holy, or is it Holy because it is Loved? (10a1–11b5)

If something is holy because the gods love it, their unanimity is no guarantee that holy things will never become unholy, for the gods may hate tomorrow what they love today. This problem is different from the one posed by the fact that what is just in one situation may be unjust in another. For if the holy varies with the affections of the gods, the same action may be holy or unholy in the same situation. In practical terms, this means that the holy cannot serve as a standard (*παράδειγμα*, 6e5) by which men can orient themselves in changing circumstances; it is not a principle of right action. In fact it might seem prudent for a pious man to pray that his very piety does not set him in opposition to himself and other pious men. At any rate, we may conclude that if the gods can alter the "form" of holiness, there is always the possibility that the requirements of a pious life will clash with those "of consistency, of a consistent and thoroughly sincere life."¹ If, on the other hand, something is holy because it "participates" in an immutable "idea" of holiness, it would still be holy though every god hated it—indeed, even if no gods exist. But if by practicing piety one does not necessarily do what the gods command or desire, why worship them at all? An unchanging "idea" of holiness insures that the holy and the unholy are not the same, but at the price of turning piety into nonsense.

There appear to be two alternatives: the arbitrariness of the holy, and the dispensability of the gods as guides to the practice of piety.² One might wish for

15. Plato, *Apology* 21b10–c2.

1. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 75. The original context of the quotation is an argument defending "the thesis of faith." The faith in question, however, is biblical. There is no reason to doubt that Strauss accepted Plato's criticism of pagan religion.

2. Seth Benardete, "A Reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*: Part I," *Interpretation* 4 (Spring 1975), p. 160.

gods who love what is intrinsically just, noble, or good (cf. 7e6–7), and whose love makes holy whatever it is bestowed upon. But if such gods exist, one can be holy without being pious, and pious without being holy. For in order to be god-beloved it suffices to be just, noble, or good.

The more general form of the question Socrates has asked Euthyphron is whether something is true simply because the gods think it is. What the gods create they presumably can destroy. Thus if they make the “ideas,” knowledge in the strict sense is impossible, even as an unattainable goal of human aspiration; for without eternal things there can be no eternal truths. According to Leibniz, the belief that something is good merely because God wills it debases all love of God and His glory; “for why praise Him for what He has done if He would be equally praiseworthy in doing the contrary?”³ The belief may be irrefutable, however. Every attempt to disprove it must rely on principles of demonstration that an all-powerful creator could render inapplicable to himself. In a Greek context, this problem is strictly theoretical, as the notion of an omnipotent god is no part of civic orthodoxy; hence it does not impair Socrates’s case against the city.⁴

Euthyphron complains that he does not understand Socrates’ question, namely, whether the holy is loved by the gods because it is holy, or is holy because it is loved. To make sense of his perplexity, we must recall that he hopes, by prosecuting his own father, to win the approval of father Zeus. Socrates might as well have asked a small child whether he is good because he obeys his parents or obeys them because he is good.

Socrates says he will try to express himself more clearly. He does nothing of the sort. What follows is a highly abstract, needlessly complicated exercise in the analysis of propositions. Socrates commits, or leads Euthyphron to commit, a series of nonsequiturs, the most remarkable being that because the holy and the god-beloved are not the same they must be diametrically opposed. Socrates’ plan in the remainder of this section is to make Euthyphron dizzy with self-doubt, too uncertain about the holy to defy his family in court, and too demoralized to continue the conversation. While administering this chasetisement, Socrates by means of the same faulty arguments, will seek the truth and reveal it.

He starts by asking whether Euthyphron understands the difference between something carried and carrying, led and leading, seen and seeing. Euthyphron thinks he does, though in all probability, he does not. The difference is not one of cause and effect, unless seeing is the cause of a thing’s being seen.⁵ Nor is it one of agent and patient, unless in seeing we act upon the thing seen.⁶ The difference thus appears to be purely grammatical: in each case Socrates contrasts active and

3. *Discourse on Metaphysics* ch. 1.

4. An omnipotent creator as a theoretical possibility is discussed briefly in Plato’s *Sophist* (265b–d, 266d).

5. Cf. *Republic* 507d–509a.

6. Cf. *Theaetetus* 153d–154a, 156d–e.

passive participles of the same verb. The reasoning behind his choice of verbs is far from evident. The first pair of participles indicate a physical, the second a moral, and the third a perceptual relation; but this subtlety is surely not intended for Euthyphron's benefit, if it is intended at all.

Socrates asks next whether there is something loved and, different from it, something loving. "How could there not be?" Euthyphron responds. In self-love, however, one is both loving (*φιλοῦν*) and loved (*φιλούμενον*). Self-love is blinding to the extent that it conceals and transfigures itself. Euthyphron's belief in his exemplary holiness is a delusion born of that passion. The self that loves him, he imagines, is not only another's but divine. His experience of divinity is self-induced. He is the unconscious cause of an imaginary effect, a patient upon whom no one acts. Perhaps this is why Socrates now replaces the active participle of each pair with an inflected passive of the same verb, thereby masking the agent or grammatical subject.

Socrates obtains Euthyphron's assent to the following propositions. Something is carried (*φερόμενον*) because it is carried (*φέρεται*), led (*ἀγόμενον*) because it is led (*ἄγεται*), seen (*ὁρόμενον*) because it is seen (*ὁρᾶται*). These statements seem meaningless but are merely trivial. In each case the inflected passive has an active sense. If his aim were to instruct Euthyphron, rather than to befuddle him, Socrates would have said outright: Something is carried because someone carries it, led because someone leads it, seen because someone sees it (cf. 10a2, c7).

Socrates elaborates on the propositions Euthyphron has accepted. (Here brackets will be used to distinguish the sense of what Socrates says from the nonsense Euthyphron hears.⁷) Not because something is seen is it seen [does one see it]; on the contrary, it is seen because it is seen [because one sees it]. Nor because it is led is it led [does one lead it], rather, it is led because it is led [because one leads it]. Again, not because it is carried is it carried [does one carry it], rather, it is carried because it is carried [because one carries it]. Socrates then asks whether his meaning is not entirely clear. Before Euthyphron can reply, Socrates says he means the following: Not because something is becoming does it become, rather, it is becoming because it becomes; nor because it is being affected is it affected, rather, it is being affected because it is affected. Euthyphron concurs, not realizing that these statements not only sound like nonsense but are nonsense. Socrates began by contrasting passive and active participles of the same verb (10a5–11); he then contrasted passive participles with inflected passives having an active sense (10b1–11); and he concludes by contrasting *γιγνόμενον* with *γίγνεται*, which are neither active nor passive in meaning, and *πάσχον* with *πάσχεται*, which are both passive in meaning (10c1–4).

7. This remark requires clarification. In Greek, the passive participle plus "is" (e.g. *φερόμενόν ἐστι*) and the inflected passive of the third person singular (e.g. *φέρεται*) are phonetically distinct and do not sound alike. However, they need not differ in meaning.

Socrates asks next whether the loved thing is either becoming or being affected by something. “Of course,” says Euthyphron. He is mistaken if, as Socrates sometimes argues, the most loveable things are ungenerated and unchanging.⁸ He is also mistaken if divine love is essentially similar to human love. The belief that something is holy because the gods love it implies that divine love affects its objects. Human love has no such power. The lover’s passion affects the lover, not the beloved; love and the lover, not love and the beloved, are related as agent and patient.

Socrates submits another proposition for Euthyphron’s approval: Not because it is a loved thing is it loved by those who love it, rather, it is a loved thing because it is loved. Euthyphron strongly assents, and goes on to affirm, in response to further questioning by Socrates, that the holy is loved by the gods because it is holy, it is not holy because it is loved. The prophet now “understands” the question with which the present segment of the conversation began, and Socrates seems to have gotten the answer he wanted. But the answer is a mere assertion. It is not the conclusion the argument demands. From the statements Euthyphron has accepted so far, only this much can be deduced: Not because the holy is a god-beloved thing is it loved by the gods, rather, it is a god-beloved thing because they love it. This trivial proposition is the only legitimate inference that can be drawn from Socrates’ long and tedious argument. By no means has he proven that divine love is a response to holiness rather than its cause. As for Euthyphron’s reasons for accepting this view, he is probably flattered by the thought that the gods cannot help loving him because he is holy.

Socrates next observes that since the holy is loved by the gods it is a loved thing and god-beloved. “How could it not be?” the prophet responds. Socrates then infers that the holy and the god-beloved must be different from each other. And he explains to his startled interlocutor that, according to the statements they have agreed upon, the holy is loved because it is holy, it is not holy because it is loved, whereas the god-beloved thing is not loved because it is god-beloved, rather, it is god-beloved because it is loved. Euthyphron accepts this as true. If he fully understood Socrates’ reasoning, however, he would dismiss it as irrelevant. At most Socrates has shown that the holy and god-beloved differ in definition; they might nonetheless be numerically, and so for all practical purposes, the same. It may be the case, in other words, that all holy things and only holy things are god-beloved.⁹

Socrates puts Euthyphron through one last exercise in false logic. Suppose the holy and god-beloved were the same, he says. Then, if the holy were loved be-

8. Plato, *Republic* 479a–480a; *Symposium* 210a–211c; *Phaedrus* 247c–e.

9. Of the commentators who recognize this point, only Geach considers it a serious objection to Socrates’ argument, and he is far from understanding the matter in its full gravity. In their preoccupation with the problem of definition, these scholars forget about the problem of the right life. It does not occur to them that if the things called holy are also dear to the gods, then philosophy as the rational quest for wisdom is neither necessary nor possible. See P. T. Geach, “Plato’s *Euthyphro*: An

cause it is holy, the god-beloved would be loved because it is god-beloved (contrary to 10e8). And if the god-beloved were god-beloved because it is loved, the holy would be holy because it is loved (contrary to 10d8). "But now you see that the two are exactly opposed, that they are in every way different from each other." This is a complete non sequitur.¹⁰ If the gods love the holy because it is holy (10d8), and if the holy and the god-beloved are not the same (10e2–11a3), then the holy must be god-beloved even if it is not *the* god-beloved. As Socrates goes on to say, the holy and the god-beloved differ in this: the one is loved because it is of a sort to be loved, whereas the other is of a sort to be loved because it is loved. The conclusion that they are opposites is a false inference from the given premises. *Yet as a theological proposition it happens to be true.* The task of finding its proper premises has been left to the reader.¹¹

Orthodox piety largely consists in praying and sacrificing to the gods. Since the gods themselves do not sacrifice and pray, they cannot be pious. Now Euthyphron assumes that the gods love the man who imitates them or who does as they do. If he is correct, the gods do not love piety. In other words, imitation of the gods is god-beloved but unholy. Or, if one insists that true holiness is god-beloved, piety in the usual sense is unholy or at least not holy. Euthyphron is too conventional or too lazy (cf. 12a4–5) to grasp these radical consequences of his position.

Socrates' paradoxical thesis, that the holy is not dear to the gods, proves to be an inference not only from Euthyphronean heterodoxy, but from common opinion as well. "Divine love" is a meaningless phrase unless it refers to something analogous to human love, for we cannot imagine passions utterly different from our own. If divine love is similar to human love, we may assume it resembles the

Analysis and Commentary," *Monist* 50 (July 1966), pp. 376–77; S. Marc Cohen, "Euthyphro 10a–11b," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 12 (1971), pp. 9–10; I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines, I: Plato on Man and Society* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), p. 210; Thomas D. Paxson, "Plato's Euthyphro 10a to 11b," *Phronesis* 17 (1972), p. 184; and Richard Sharvey, "Euthyphro 9d–11b: Analysis and Definition in Plato and Others," *Nous* 6 (May 1972), p. 120.

10. Commentators who assume that Socrates intends to present a logically compelling argument—and hence that it is proper to concentrate exclusively on the logic of this section—respond to his non sequitur in one of three ways. Cohen and Rose say nothing about it. Anderson, Brown, and Paxson interpret it in light of the following sentence ("the two are not the same"). Allen, Geach, and Hall mistranslate it as "the opposite is the case." Thus do these commentators ignore, eviscerate, or conceal the most radical statement in the dialogue. See S. Marc Cohen, "Euthyphro 10a–11b," pp. 1–13; Lynn E. Rose, "A Note on the Euthyphro, 10–11," *Phronesis* 10 (1965), pp. 149–50; Albert Anderson, "Socratic Reasoning in the Euthyphro," *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (March 1969), pp. 476–77; John H. Brown, "The Logic of the Euthyphro 10a–11b," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 14, No. 54 (January 1964), p. 3, n. 5; Thomas D. Paxson, "Plato's Euthyphro 10a to 11b," p. 183; R. E. Allen, *Plato's 'Euthyphro' and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), p. 42; P. T. Geach, "Plato's Euthyphro: An Analysis and Commentary," pp. 376–77; John C. Hall, "Plato: Euthyphro 10a1–11b10," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 18, No. 70 (January 1968), p. 3.

11. My interpretation in the next two paragraphs owes much to Leo Strauss' unpublished lecture on the Euthyphro.

wise man's love more than that of the unwise, if only because the wise man is said to be dear to the gods.¹² Now it is characteristic of the wise man to be fonder of persons who are like him than of those who are unlike him; he naturally tends to be fonder of persons capable of guiding themselves than of those who must always be told what to do. In fact, he would not love someone whose chief "virtue" is obedience. But orthodoxy is above all else a morality of obedience. It follows that the gods, being supremely wise, could not love piety.

More than mere vanity led Euthyphron to affirm that the gods love the holy because it is holy. He confuses piety with justice, and it is not generally supposed that something is just or unjust simply because it is loved or hated by the gods. Common opinion recognizes, although unclearly, that the basic rules of justice, unlike the particular details of religious observances, do not depend for their validity on the desires or preferences of divine beings.

Euthyphron tacitly believes that what makes anything holy and therefore dear to the gods is justice. Since he has failed to articulate this view, Socrates now chides him for not stating the "essence" (*οὐσία*, 111a7) of the holy. He mentioned an "accidental property" (*πάθος*, 111a8) of the holy, namely, the fact that it is loved by all the gods; but he has not yet uncovered its "being" (*ὄν*, 111b1). "So if it is dear to you," Socrates continues, "do not hide it from me, but once more from the beginning tell what the holy *is*, and never mind if it is loved by the gods or however it is affected—for we shall not disagree on that—but tell me zealously what is the holy and the unholy." With these words Socrates steers the discussion back toward the problem of the relation between justice and piety, preparing us for the explicit treatment of that subject following the "interlude," which now ensues.

VI. Interlude (111b6e4)

Euthyphron is baffled. He cannot express what he thinks, he tells Socrates, since every statement they propose always moves around them somehow, and is unwilling to stay where they put it. What perplexes him perhaps as much as the specific results of the exercise to which he has just been subjected, is its seeming logical rigor. The mystic seeks a direct intuition of the highest things, a comprehensive insight (*νοῦς*) that neither depends upon nor completes a process of reasoning (*λόγος*)¹. Euthyphron, whose name means "instant mind," is not used to thinking things through; yet Socrates has made him follow a long and tortuous argument step by step. The motion of which he complains is, at bottom, the discursive activity of reason.

12. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179^a23–39; Hesiod, *Works and Days* 293–97.

1. Unlike the philosopher, whose best insights presuppose a long and methodical training of the dianoetic faculty (Plato, *Republic* 510c–511e, 521d ff.; *Sophist* 218d1–219a3). Only near the end of the dialogue, after having examined *through discourse* a number of related *λόγοι*, does Socrates refer to his *νοῦς* (14d5); and what he intuits is the nature of his *conversational* philosophy.

Reasoning appears to be a species of self-movement, as does life itself. In order to distinguish truth from error, the mind must be free of external compulsion; it must be able to move itself along correct paths of inference. In classical metaphysics, the common ground of life and thought as forms of self-movement is soul. The spontaneity of the growth of plants, the motility of animals, and the power of rational discourse all seem to testify to the existence of something not reducible to the mechanism of moved matter, and this "something" ancient philosophers called *ψυχή*, "soul."² Now in order for Euthyphron to serve as a mouthpiece of the gods, his mind's power of self-movement must be put in suspension. Accordingly, Socrates playfully hints that Euthyphron is soulless. Alluding to the myth of Daedalus' statues, which were so lifelike they moved of their own accord, Socrates says: "Your statements, Euthyphron, are like the works of my forefather³ Daedalus; and if I had been talking and had set them down, perhaps you would have laughed at me, saying that on account of my kinship with him, my works in speeches (*τὰ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ἔργα*, 11c3) run away and refuse to stay where they are put. But since the suppositions are yours, some other joke is needed; for they are not willing to stand still for you, as it seems even to you yourself." Euthyphron's statements are like moving statues if they are lifeless copies of living speech. This would be the case if they were not his own "work" but that of another. And if a god speaks through him, how does he differ from a statue that talks? The god is to the prophet what the ventriloquist is to the dummy.

In Euthyphron's opinion, Socrates' joke was quite apt: "For this moving around and not staying in place—I am not the one who put it into [those statements], but you. I think you're the Daedalus, since as far as depends on me they would have stood still." Euthyphron in effect accuses Socrates of putting words in his mouth; he is more right than he knows. Was it not Socrates who compared himself to Daedalus in the first place? He has put in Euthyphron's mouth the accusation that he has put words in his mouth. One is reminded of the ventriloquist's dummy who complained that he was not allowed to speak his own mind. Socrates acts *in loco deorum*.

Socrates conjectures that he may have become much cleverer in the art than Daedalus; for the Cunning Worker only made his own works move, whereas he, it seems, makes those of outsiders move as well. Socrates adds that the most exquisite feature of his art is that he is wise against his will. "For I would rather have my speeches stand fast and be fixed immovably than acquire the wisdom of

2. Cf. Plato, *Laws* 895b–c; *Phaedrus* 245c5–e8; *Sophist* 249a4–7; *Phaedo* 105c7–d4; Aristotle, *On the Soul* 427^a18–23.

3. It was customary in Athens for sons to inherit the trades of their fathers, and for each trade to have a divine or semidivine patron. Socrates' father, Sophroniscus, is thought to have been a stonemason, and Daedalus was the patron of all who worked in stone. This may be one reason why Socrates calls Daedalus his "forefather" (Burnet). But Socrates seems to have something else in mind as well. By claiming descent from Daedalus, he implicitly claims descent from Zeus (cf. Plato, *Alcibiades I* 121a).

Daedalus and the wealth of Tantalus to boot.” What Socrates means here by an immovable λόγος is a discourse that can neither be refuted nor improved upon because it is the true and final account of the matter under examination. It is the product or work (ἔργον) of a completed inquiry. We cannot advance one step toward a final account, however, unless the matter of the inquiry is determinate or fixed. In other words, the pursuit of wisdom presupposes an immovable object of cognition as well as a moving mind.⁴ It follows from this that if the gods can alter the “forms” of things at will, our λόγοι may at any moment become as useless to us as a runaway statue to its nominal owner.⁵ Socrates suggests he would rather know the unmoving “form” of man than know how to produce, after the fashion of Daedalus, a mobile image of man. Still less does he wish for the wealth of Tantalus, which in the present context means the poverty of Euthyphron. The mythical Tantalus was condemned by the gods to everlasting punishment for betraying their secrets to men. He was made to stand forever in water up to his chin, while savory fruit hung just over his head. Each time he tried to eat or drink, his “riches” moved out of reach.⁶ Euthyphron’s predicament differs in that the riches beyond his reach are the very mysteries Tantalus was punished for revealing. The prophet cannot express what he thinks because he does not know what he believes he knows.

“But enough of this [banter],” says Socrates, who then implies, again, that Euthyphron needs a Daedalus to set him in motion: “Since you seem spoiled to me, I shall be zealous for you, so that you may teach me about the holy.” Exhorting Euthyphron not to grow weary, Socrates turns directly to the underlying problem of the dialogue—the relation between justice and piety.

PART TWO: THE GODS, JUSTICE, AND THE ΤΕΧΝΗ OF PIETY

VII. *Is Everything Holy Just?* (11e4–12e4)

Socrates begins by asking whether all the holy is just. Euthyphron, predictably, answers in the affirmative. Socrates then asks: Is all the just also holy, or is all the holy just, and not all the just holy, but some of it holy, and some of it something else? Euthyphron is unable to follow this line of questioning. We might have expected as much. Since he tacitly identifies the holy with the just, it is as though he has been asked whether some part of justice is not just. Socrates suggests sarcastically that Euthyphron ought to be able to follow or keep up

4. Plato, *Sophist* 294b–c.

5. Cf. Plato, *Meno* 97d–e.

6. Homer, *Odyssey* 11.583–93.

(ἔποσθαι, 12a3), inasmuch as the prophet surpasses him in youth¹ no less than in wisdom. He thereupon concludes that Euthyphron has indeed been spoiled by his wealth of wisdom. And, alluding to the Tantalus myth, he urges the prophet to “stretch” himself, insisting that the question is really not hard to fathom. In order to make its meaning clear, he offers two examples which illustrate in a rough way the relation of a whole to a part. Euthyphron readily grasps that fear is wider in extent than reverence, just as number is more inclusive than odd or even. Socrates then contends that, in a like manner, the holy is not co-extensive with justice but is rather a part of it. When Euthyphron agrees to this also, Socrates bids him to tell what sort of part the holy might be. Before considering Euthyphron's answer, we must first examine Socrates' examples in some detail.

In the first example, Socrates takes exception to a verse of poetry, which reads: Zeus the lover,² who engendered all these things, you shall not revile; for where fear is, there also is reverence. Socrates points out that we are often afraid without feeling reverence or shame (αἰδώς, 12b4). People who fear poverty and disease and other evils of that kind do not revere those fearful things. On the other hand, anyone who is ashamed at having done something disgraceful dreads and fears a bad reputation. Thus the poet has it backwards. He should have said, “Where shame is, there also is fear.”

There are a number of points to be made in connection with this passage.

1. The main target of Socrates' criticism is not the particular verse, or its author, but the poetic tradition as such. This is indicated by two facts. First, Socrates does not mention the poet's name (Stasinus);³ second, he plays on the root of the verb ποιεῖν: “I say the opposite of the poet who poetized this poem.” What the poet says or means is that Zeus is a heavenly father and a god of love. Socrates rejects this view, as it implicitly asserts the insufficiency of the divine nature. He quietly accuses the poets (and the city fathers) of ascribing their own imperfection to the gods. It is because they lack immortality that men seek it through the progeny of their minds and the children of their loins.⁴ It is questionable, therefore, that immortal gods should feel the need either to create or to procreate. Indeed, if the gods are perfect beings, as is often said, they exist always in a state of wantless self-sufficiency. Lacking nothing desirable, they desire nothing. Divine love is an oxymoron, for the true gods are nonerotic.⁵ If the holy is that which is god-beloved, the holy “is not.”

1. The word νεώτερος (younger) at 12a4 recalls the word νεώτερον (newer thing) in Euthyphron's opening question, and thus indicates a new beginning in the dialogue.

2. The best authenticated manuscripts read “lover” (στέρξαντα) here, instead of Burnet's “doer” or “worker” (ἔρξαντα), a conjecture without manuscript authority. Burnet contends that his emendation is needed to make the passage intelligible. He fails to notice the thematic connection between Zeus as lover and the holy as the god-beloved. John Burnet, ed., *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

3. See Burnet's note on 12a7.

4. Plato, *Laws* 721b–c; *Symposium* 209c–d.

5. Plato, *Symposium* 202b2–e1; cf. *Lysis* 215a1–c3.

2. Stasinus' dictum, that reverence always accompanies fear, is not so mistaken as Socrates pretends. For it is not fear in general but the fear of Zeus to which the poet refers. Piety, Socrates intimates, is the reverence or shame of a god-fearing man. The holy is an "affect" (πάθος), not a being (cf. 11a8).

3. Socrates virtually defines shame as fear of a bad reputation.⁶ The Greek word for reputation (δόξα, 12c1) also means "opinion." A man of ill repute is someone who is opined to do what is opined to be bad. Socrates has a bad reputation partly because, by questioning the city's dominant opinions, he threatens the basis on which reputations are given.⁷ In order to philosophize, one must be shameless—which is not to say that a philosopher does not fear the harmful consequences of a bad reputation.

4. By linking piety with shame, Socrates hints at the social utility of religion. Since the pious man fears a bad reputation with the gods, he will be reluctant to break the laws even when the temptation is great and his reputation among men is secure.

5. The conventional status of the shameful and hence of the holy is inferable from the "natural" character of such evils as poverty and disease. The badness of pneumonia is clearly much less a matter of opinion than the badness of neglecting a sacred burial rite. Yet it is man's fear of natural terrors, combined with his native ignorance of their causes, which disposes him to ascribe his good or ill fortune to the interventions of invisible superhuman beings.⁸ In worshipping gods, man worships the personification of his own fears. There is then much truth in the poet's dictum. Men revere poverty and disease after all.

Socrates presents his second example as an elaboration of the first. Reverence is a part (μέριον, 12c6) of fear, he says, as the odd is of number. Hence it is not correct to say that where number is, there also is the odd; but it is correct to say that where the odd is, there also is number. Euthyphron is now able to follow Socrates' argument, and he affirms that justice is more extensive than, and includes, the holy. Socrates says next that if the holy is a part (μέρος, 12d5) of justice, they should try to find out what sort of part it might be. Two possibilities may be inferred from his examples. First, the holy is a part of justice as the odd is of number. In this case, the holy divides the realm of justice with its opposite; for the even is a coequal part of number, and is the contrary of the odd. Thus, if one part of justice is holy, the other part must be unholy—which means that not all the holy is just. We have already seen why this is so. Piety tends to obscure the difference between loyalty and justice. The second possibility is that the holy is a part of justice as reverence is of fear. We revere those who we believe have the power to hurt us but refrain from doing so because of their goodness. Reverence might thus be described as the kind of fear most properly felt toward gods. Is pi-

6. Cf. Plato, *Laws* 646e–647b.

7. Plato, *Apology* 21b10–e3; cf. *Meno* 93b10–94a5.

8. Cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan* ch. 11 end; Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise* Preface.

ety, then, a kind of justice to the gods? The remainder of the dialogue is chiefly concerned with this question.

Socrates now introduces a third example. He says that if Euthyphron had asked him what part of number is even, he would have replied, "that which is not scalene, but isosceles."⁹ When Euthyphron indicates his approval of this answer, Socrates advises him to explain in the same way what part of justice is holy. It is difficult to see how he can. Either "scalene" and "isosceles" are names of triangles, or they are odd and even by other names. If the former is the case, Socrates' answer makes no sense at all. If the latter, the answer is circular or worse, as it amounts to this: the even is that which is not odd but even. Euthyphron first characterized piety as opposition to impiety or injustice (5d8–e5); he later defended his lawsuit on the grounds that it is just to punish injustice (8b7–9). By defining the even in terms of its contrary, Socrates mimics Euthyphron's failure to give an account of justice. By not asking what number is, does he hint at Euthyphron's failure to ask what a god is? In the next three sections of the dialogue, Socrates will investigate the nature of divinity on the basis of an account of justice. He will prove that injustice to the gods is impossible, and hence that impiety "is not." This is why he now says that if Euthyphron instructs him adequately, they can tell Meletus to stop doing injustice and bring no more indictments for impiety. It is unjust to prosecute a man for a crime no one can commit.

VIII. Piety as an Art of Ruling (12e5–13d3)

Injustice to the gods is possible only if we have obligations to them that we might shirk, and such obligations exist only if men and gods are partners or sharers in a common good. The city understands itself to be the lesser member of a human–divine partnership; citizens regard their duties to each other as deriving from, and subordinate to, their duties to the gods. Two kinds of justice in particular deserve to be called bonds of community: political justice, which governs the relations between ruler and ruled, and commercial justice, which regulates the transactions of those who trade. Reflection on this simple fact leads to the conclusion that there are only three ways in which we might have obligations to the gods: as their rulers, as their subordinates, or as parties to an exchange in which they also participate. Socrates tacitly considers the first possibility at 13a1–d4, the second at 13d5–14c1, and the third at 14c2–15a10. If it should turn out that we have no obligations to the gods, then impiety is an uncommittable crime, and what is more important, the gods have nothing to do with us, since justice is strictly a human affair.

One further general comment on this and the next two sections of the dialogue is in order here. While examining the popular conception of piety as justice to the

9. The correct definition, "a number divisible into two equal parts," occurs in Plato's *Laws* (895e).

gods, Socrates will also test an hypothesis of his own, namely, that piety is an art. He is led to make this bizarre assumption by his discovery, in the first part of the dialogue, that we cannot rely upon νόμος to determine what our pious duties are. One sacred law may command actions that another forbids; and the recognized authorities on divinity—to say nothing of the gods themselves—may hold conflicting views of how we should act. In order, then, for piety to be a cause of right action, it must itself provide the knowledge required to guide the pious man. Now the only available models of independent, practical knowledge are the arts.¹ Accordingly, Socrates assumes that if piety is a genuine virtue, it must also be an art or resemble an art. To be more specific, it must be beneficial (13b7–d6), have a definite subject matter (13a4–b5), aim at a determinate product (13d9–14a10), have teachable principles (14b8–c2), and realize its product in steps that can be explained and justified in terms of those principles (14d9–e5, 15a7–8).² The new standpoint Socrates will adopt is indicated by his frequent use of “technical” language, and by his introduction of the words *δσιότης* (holiness) and *εὐσέβεια* (piety). While these words refer to a quality or disposition of soul, and hence conceivably to a type of cognition, the words *εὐσεβής* (pious) and *ὄσιον* (holy)—the key terms of the discussion up to now—typically refer to acts performed at the behest of law or in conformity to law. It is, of course, not unusual for Socrates to assume an analogy between technical proficiency and a commonly accepted virtue. Among other things, his intention is to point up the absence of knowledge from the behavior and states of character generally recognized as virtuous.

To return to the conversation. Euthyphron now undertakes to explain what part of justice is holy. In his opinion, he says, it is the part which concerns the care (*θεραπεία*, 12e7) of the gods. The remaining part of justice, he adds, has to do with the care of human beings. Socrates replies that although these statements appear quite fine to him, he is still in need of one small piece of information; for he does not yet know what Euthyphron means by “care.” He wonders if the care of gods is anything like the care we bestow on other things. He then observes, with Euthyphron’s approval, that not everyone knows how to care for horses or dogs, only the horseman or the huntsman. Socrates goes on to suggest that horsemanship (*ἵππικὴ*) is the care of horses (*ἵπποι*); huntsmanship (*κυνηγετικὴ*) the care of dogs (*κύνες*); and herdsmanship (*βοηλατικὴ*) the care of cattle (*βόες*). Euthyphron agrees, and he affirms, in his next reply, that holiness and piety are the care of gods. Judging however, by the obvious etymological link between each of the aforementioned skills and the animal species subject to its care, holiness is nothing more than the care of holy things. If there is a “care of

1. Allan Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” in *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 321.

2. I was led to recognize this pattern of argument by Terrence Irwin’s astute observations on Socrates’ “technical conception of virtue,” *Plato’s Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 71–7, 82–6, 90–7.

the gods," it would be the work of *θεοτική*, an art as unheard of in Greek as "godsmanship" is in English.

Socrates asks next whether every kind of care provides some good and benefit for its recipient. He then suggests, with Euthyphron assenting, that horses are benefited and improved by horsemanship, dogs by huntsmanship, cattle by herdsmanship, and everything else by its appropriate type of care. Or is the purpose of care to harm its recipient, he inquires? Euthyphron denies this with an oath. Socrates is thus led to ask if holiness, since it is the care of gods, is also a benefit to the gods and improves them. "And would you accept this," he continues, "that whenever you do something holy, you make one of the gods better?" Euthyphron swears by Zeus that he does not.

The Greek word *θεραπεία*, which Socrates uses in the sense of "care," primarily means "service." This is one reason why he subsequently inquires whether piety consists in serving the gods and whether religious services are dear to them. For present purposes, the most revealing translation of the term is "medical treatment" or, simply, "therapy." All men are in need of therapy, if only because no man is perfectly wise. We may infer from this that if philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom, it must also be the care of the soul.³ Certainly the Platonic Socrates exhibits an uncanny grasp of the variety of souls, their characteristic types of ignorance, and the ways in which these can be mitigated or rendered less harmful. Socrates' knowledge of *ψυχή* enables him to practice justice on a higher plane than can any public man. Through conversation he gives to each interlocutor what is proper or fitting for him.

Socrates not only accepts the proposition that justice is the therapy of human beings; he shows us, by his handling of Euthyphron, how a skilled therapist goes about his work. Euthyphron, of course, is as unaware of his illness as he is of Socrates' attempt to treat him. In this respect he is like the city, which does not know that by executing Socrates, it will kill the Athenian who best comprehends the true standards of political health.⁴

Socrates' quarrel with Athens reveals that a simply rational solution to the paramount political problem, the problem of who should rule, is humanly unattainable. The reign of perfect justice requires a ruler whose superiority to the ruled exceeds that by which a medical expert surpasses a layman. For, to say nothing of the greater difficulty in knowing the health of the soul than that of the body, the medical art does not in itself enable the doctor to persuade the sick to obey his "orders"; nor is his expertise so evident to nonexperts that they can always distinguish him from a quack.⁵ The political problem may then be said to arise from the fact that no human ruler is as manifestly and transcendently superior to the ruled as any normal adult human being is to his dog or horse.⁶ Soc-

3. Cf. *Apology* 29d8–e2, 30a8–b2; *Republic* 518d–e, 527d–e, 586e.

4. Cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 521e.

5. Plato, *Gorgias* 464d.

6. Cf. Plato, *Statesman* 275e.

rates mentioned horsemanship and huntsmanship because these skills are models of rule over willing subjects.⁷ He mentioned herdsmanship because it is a model of rule over large groups.⁸ The demands of justice point to the transcendence of politics in the willing obedience of mankind to a divine shepherd.⁹ This means, however, that if men do justice to the gods by caring for them, the traditional metaphor needs to be inverted: men are gods to the gods—human herders and trainers of divine brutes.

Socrates denies any intention of imputing to Euthyphron the opinion that piety benefits the gods and makes them better. Indeed, he says, it was precisely because he did not think Euthyphron believed such a thing that he raised the whole question about the meaning of “care.” Euthyphron accepts this explanation; we should not. The care of gods is absurd because it is impossible to benefit or improve a perfect being. But the Olympians are far from perfect. According to Euthyphron, they war upon each other, are capable of committing injustice, and disagree about the noble, the just, and the good. In view of their power and ferocity, would it not be in our interest to promote the same sort of improvement in them that an animal trainer fosters in the beasts under his care? Piety, it would seem, is the art of taming and controlling the gods for our benefit. Its modern counterpart is the conquest and domestication of nature by means of scientific technology.

The crucial difficulty to which Socrates alludes is not peculiar to the religious beliefs of the Athenians or the Greeks. Theists of almost every description conceive of God or the gods as providential beings, who are more likely to benefit us if we worship them correctly than if we worship them incorrectly or not at all. It is the belief in particular divine providence that Socrates undertakes to refute in this section.

In order to benefit us, the gods must act. Action, unlike the instinctive behavior of herding animals or the trained obedience of dogs and horses, requires a conscious purpose or end, as a motive. Unless the actor is deceived, he pursues an end which has not yet been attained; he seeks to make a potential good actual. Other things being equal, he is happier when he accomplishes his goal than when he fails to do so. Now if the gods are perfect and blessedly happy, as is commonly said, they cannot have unrealized ends; whatever the divine good is, their enjoyment of it must be perpetual and at each moment complete. The gods, therefore, can have no motive to act.¹⁰ Consequently, they would not benefit us. To deny this is to imply that the gods are not perfect and happy, and hence that they can be improved.

Obviously, piety is not a virtue if the gods are not benefactors. And, as we have just seen, Socrates implicitly argues that they are not. But he goes further.

7. Cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 1.1.2.

8. Cf. Plato, *Statesman* 261d–e, 271d–e.

9. Cf. Plato, *Laws* 713c–714a.

10. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1178^b7–24.

He intimates that if piety does move the gods to act, it is a vice. Each time someone acts, his condition changes. This is so even if we abstract from the alteration in bodily and mental states that invariably accompanies human action.¹¹ The very particularity of action—the fact that it always involves the application of particular means to particular ends—implies that before initiating any action, one must have been either not acting or doing something else. If therefore the gods' condition is one of blessedness or perfection, it follows that they cannot act without changing for the worse. Thus to the extent that prayer and sacrifice induce the gods to benefit us, piety is a kind of care that harms its recipients, and may be defined as injustice to the gods.

In order to maintain that the gods would be neither harmed nor improved by caring for us, one must postulate a radical dissimilarity between their ways and ours. Specifically, it is necessary to argue that only human action affects the actor or is undertaken for the sake of an absent good. But a new difficulty arises. Not only does the word “action” cease to have any intelligible meaning when applied to gods, but so, presumably, does “thought,” “life,” “will,” or any other word that names an attribute of human beings. Put somewhat differently, all divine “attributes” become unfathomable and nameless.

Once again the dialogue seems to confront us with two alternatives. Either the logical structure of human action is a suitable starting point for speculation about divinity, or it is not suitable. If the first alternative is true, then we must deny divine providence and concede the uselessness of sacrifice and prayer. If the second is true, we have no right to make any positive predication of the gods, not even that they “are,” much less that they demand to be worshiped.¹² It would seem, then, that either impiety is not injustice to the gods, or there is no good reason for believing it to be so.

IX. Piety as an Art of Serving (13d4–14c4)

Socrates continues to question Euthyphron about the meaning of “care.” If holiness does not benefit or improve the gods, what sort of care can it be? Euthyphron responds that it is the very sort slaves render to their masters. Socrates interprets this to mean that holiness is a kind of skilled service to gods (*ὑπηρετική τις . θεοῖς*, 13d7), and Euthyphron concurs. Socrates then points out that the skilled services used by doctors assist in producing a specific work, namely, health, just as the skilled services used by shipwrights or housebuilders aid in producing boats or houses. When Euthyphron agrees, Socrates asks him what work the skilled service to gods helps to produce. “It’s obvious that you know,”

11. For an “anthropological” argument against the possibility of divine governance, see Plato, *Republic* 380d–381d.

12. The classic statement of a “negative” theology is Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* 1.50–60.

he continues, “since you claim that of all mankind you know the divine things most beautifully.” “And what I say is true,” Euthyphron responds. Socrates thereupon exhorts him in the name of Zeus to explain what that resplendent work (*πάγκαλον ἔργον*) is which the gods produce by using us as servants (*ὑπηρέταις*).

The prophet’s reply is embarrassingly vague: The gods make many fine things. Perhaps he is confused by the “technical” flavor of Socrates’ remarks. For Euthyphron does have a definite point of view on the subject. He believes the gods’ work is justice, and that they accomplish it by ruling us. Socrates plays on an ambiguity in the word *ὑπηρευτική*, which signifies both an art of serving and a subordinate art. The former meaning is the one Euthyphron has in mind. In his opinion the many are properly the gods’ slaves, and piety is the homage they must render. Socrates emphasizes the latter meaning when he contrasts piety with such architectonic or master arts as medicine and housebuilding. Are we then to understand that the gods, in order to accomplish justice, would use pious men as subordinates (*ὑπηρέταις*, 13e11)?

Justice is a kind of care (12e6), and care aims at the good and benefit of its recipients (13b4). A prodigious number of the benefits we enjoy are provided by doctors, shipwrights, housebuilders, and the like. Indeed, without the services of these and other craftsmen human life would almost certainly be poor, nasty, brutish, and short. However, it is equally obvious that justice does not result automatically from the practice of arts. The arts and their products are often misused, and unavoidably so. For there is no art which can make a man expert in the proper uses of expertise. Each art deals with a partial good, not the human good as such; and each takes for granted the worth of its own product. The goodness of health, for example, is not a finding of the medical art, but its presupposition. Partly for this reason, the doctor as doctor is not qualified to dictate how much health care should be provided, to whom, and with what portion of the community’s resources. Yet neither can laymen make this determination with anything like technical accuracy. In order to insure that the arts are utilized for the betterment of mankind, the master craftsmen must themselves be directed by someone who understands the true hierarchy of human ends, and who, in addition, commands a detailed knowledge of the contingencies of time and place. This supreme director of the arts could only be a god. If the gods rule us, Socrates suggests, they would do so by ordering the arts in the manner best suited to promote our well-being. They would therefore use master craftsmen as their subordinates, not pious men. Precisely if the gods rule, piety contributes nothing to that *πάγκαλον ἔργον* which is justice.

But do the gods rule? Obviously, a divinely-managed economy is a pure conceit of the philosophic imagination. Of greater significance is the fact that a divine ruler would have no need of the goods and services whose just distribution he secures among his human subjects. Thus he would not partake of the benefits which he confers. But if gods and men do not share in a common good, they do

not make up a community. This suggests two possibilities. Either the gods are not our rulers, or they work for our benefit with no advantage to themselves. Now someone who works exclusively for another's good could be called a slave.¹ If the gods establish justice among us, it is they who render the kind of care that slaves give to their masters.

When Socrates asked him to identify the gods' work, Euthyphron dodged the question. The gods, he said, make many fine things. Socrates now tries to pin him down to a more definite answer. He points out that generals and farmers also accomplish many fine results. Nonetheless, it would not be hard to state the sum and substance (*τὸ κεφάλαιον*, 14a2) of their respective works: generals produce victory in war, farmers produce food from the earth. Euthyphron has to agree. But when Socrates asks him to state the sum and substance of the gods' business (*ἔργασία*, 14a10), he again evades the question. The task of understanding such matters precisely is very great, the prophet replies, and therefore he will simply (*ἀπλῶς*, 14b2) say this: If someone knows how to do and say what is acceptable (*κεχαρισμένα*, 14b2) to the gods by praying and sacrificing, he does what is holy, and this preserves both private households and the common possessions of cities; but the opposite of what is acceptable is impious, and this overturns and destroys everything. Euthyphron's answer is not only evasive, it is condescending. His former respect for Socrates has been entirely replaced by contempt. Indeed he considers Socrates inferior to the many. For it is the piety of ordinary citizens in which he now sees fit to instruct him. The dialogue has taken a curious turn. Euthyphron's attitude toward Socrates has come to resemble Socrates' attitude toward him. Each thinks the other would be well advised to return to orthodoxy.

Socrates responds to the prophet's "simple" explanation by suggesting it was not simple enough. Euthyphron could have answered much more briefly had he been willing, Socrates contends, but he is obviously not zealous to teach. For when he was on the verge of revealing the sum and substance of the gods' work, he held back. If only he had spoken without reserve, Socrates continues, "I would already have learned from you sufficiently about holiness." This is a remarkable statement. It implies that a satisfactory answer to the question "What is the holy?" is to be found in the preceding exchange.

The most skillful general cannot foresee, much less provide against, every contingency that might rob him of victory. Nor can the most skillful farmer insure that his crops will not be ruined by bad weather, pestilence, or blight. Man invents arts and practices them out of a concern for his own well-being. But art cannot secure the conditions on which the success of his undertakings depends; it cannot eliminate the role of chance in his affairs. Yet he cares too much about the outcome of his endeavors to be fully reconciled to the power of chance. He therefore turns to gods in the hope that they may grant him security and success. Their

1. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 343c1–6, 344b4–8.

“work” is the mastery of fortune. Piety is the time-honored and universal expression of man’s desire to control the uncontrollable.²

In order to do their work well, the gods must be sovereign over the things and processes of the world. Yet if they are radically free beings, man can neither anticipate nor confine what they do; he is their plaything and so, in effect, a plaything of chance.³ His hope of salvation is unreasonable—unless his religious observances exert a kind of compulsion upon the gods.⁴ Piety presupposes that men are too weak to control chance but strong enough to control the beings who can control chance. When citizens sacrifice and pray, they unconsciously seek to be the lords or employers of the gods. Again, it seems, it is the gods who render the sort of care that slaves give to their masters.

X. Piety as an Art of Bartering (14c5–15a10)

After chiding Euthyphron for his unwillingness to teach, Socrates remarks that the lover must follow the beloved wherever he leads. We may expect that he is about to make himself as obnoxious as an unwanted suitor who will not take no for an answer. Pursuing an implication of Euthyphron’s last statement (cf. 14b3–5), Socrates wonders if holiness is a certain knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*, 14c5) of sacrifice and prayer. Euthyphron affirms that it is. Socrates then asks if sacrifice consists in giving gifts to the gods, and prayer in making requests of them. When the prophet assents to this also, Socrates concludes that holiness is “a knowledge of giving and asking in regard to gods” (10d1). Euthyphron’s response is sarcastic: “You have caught my meaning quite beautifully.” But he has missed Socrates’ meaning, namely, that if the most we can know about gods is how to give *answers* and ask *questions* in regard to them, piety is philosophy.¹ Socrates then retorts: “I am one who longs, my friend, for your wisdom, and I apply my mind to it, so that nothing you say will fall to the ground.” In this rejoinder the Greek words *φίλος* and *σοφία* occur almost in succession. As we shall see, the nature of philosophy appears more plainly in this section of the dialogue than in any other.

Returning to his point of departure, Socrates inquires whether the service (*ὑπηρεσία*, 14d6) to the gods consists in asking them and giving to them. Euthyphron answers in the affirmative. Socrates then suggests that the right way (*ὀρθῶς*, 14d9) of asking the gods is to ask for things we need from them, and conversely, that the right way of giving to the gods is to give them things they need from us. “For it wouldn’t be an artful way (*τεχνικόν*, 14e3) of giving,” he

2. Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.6–10.

3. Cf. Plato, *Laws* 644d–e.

4. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 362c, 364b–365a; Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 2.84.

1. Cf. section VI, n. 1. For a provocative if overzealous interpretation of Socrates’ meaning, see Gershon W. Rabinowitz, “Platonic Piety: An Essay Toward the Solution of an Enigma,” *Phronesis* 3 (1958). pp. 116–19.

explains, "to give someone something he doesn't need." This is Euthyphron's opinion too. Socrates thereupon concludes that holiness is a kind of bartering art (*ἐμπορικὴ* . . . *τις* . . . *τέχνη*, 14e6) by which men and gods trade with each other. Euthyphron's patience is nearly at an end. He tells Socrates to call it a bartering art if he likes.

Socrates protests that he is not pleased by the new definition unless it happens to be true. And he seems to have his doubts, for he wonders whether the gods obtain any benefit from our gifts. What they give is evident to everyone, he says, since we have nothing good that does not come from them. But what benefit do they derive from the things we give to them? "Or have we so much the better of them in this bartering, that while we get all good things from them, they get nothing from us?"

Euthyphron can scarcely believe his ears. He demands to know whether Socrates really thinks the gods benefit from our gifts. This is not the first time he became indignant at the suggestion that piety benefits the gods (cf. 13c6–10). Yet if piety satisfies a need of the gods, as for instance a need to be honored and obeyed, would it not be a benefit to them? Let us then assume that the gods need nothing from us and therefore gain nothing from our devotions. If they nonetheless demand to be worshipped in return for the good fortune they bestow, they act about as sensibly as someone who trades gold for dross. Piety, one might say, is the art of swindling the gods. To avoid this consequence, one must deny that gods and men are in any way linked by contractual obligations or commercial ties. Specifically, one must reject the notion of a covenant in which divine protection is the promised reward for obedience on the part of a chosen people. Earlier we saw that gods and men are not connected by political relations of rule and subordination. We are therefore entitled to conclude that gods and men do not make up a community and do not share in a common good. It follows from this that piety is not justice to the gods, nor is impiety a crime against them.²

Socrates came closest to mentioning philosophy after suggesting that the right way to give or to ask is to do so according to need, and before interpreting the most sacred of all relationships—that between a people and its gods—as an economic arrangement founded on human self-interest and divine gullibility. What emerges more clearly in this than in any other section of the dialogue is the profoundly utilitarian bent of Socrates' thought. In this connection we may recall his proposal in the *Republic* that incestuous matings be deemed sacred if they produce offspring with good natures.³ Socrates' standard of right action is the good in the sense of the beneficial or useful (*ὠφελία*, 13b8; 14e10). He evaluates all institutions and moral norms from the standpoint of their capacity to serve human

2. Thus Frederick Rosen is only half right when he claims that Plato's intention is to show that "justice, not [traditional] piety, connects the human and the divine." See his "Piety and Justice, Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Philosophy* 43 (April 1968), p. 109.

3. Plato, *Republic* 458e–459b10, 461e1–3, 464c.

needs.⁴ However, unlike the utilitarian thinkers of classic modernity, Socrates recognizes a hierarchy of needs which is neither subjective nor determined by the strongest passions of most men most of the time, or of any man when threatened with violent death. Man's highest need, according to Socrates, is to become a being without needs.⁵ This is of course a need we can never satisfy, and for the same reason that we cannot become simply wise. The wisest man practices therapy upon himself and his sensible friends as much and as long as he can. For only the gods enjoy completely and continuously that good which is desirable solely for its own sake and never as a means to another end.

Let us pause for a moment to speculate on what the divine good might be. That the divine good is contemplation is suggested by the following considerations. Our concept of perfection contains two elements that are not simply or wholly compatible. First, there is the notion of self-sufficiency. A perfect being, we tend to assume, must exist solely by virtue of its own nature, depending on nothing external to itself. The second element is the idea of happiness. We tend to imagine that a perfect being would enjoy the highest degree of felicity. Now happiness, at least in the common understanding, is a state or condition in which all desires are harmoniously satisfied. But desire originates in a felt need, privation, or lack, whereas a self-sufficient being is by definition exempt from every deficiency, and so from all desire. Consequently, as long as happiness is conceived in terms of the satisfaction of desire, the happiness of a self-sufficient being cannot be distinguished from that of a corpse or a stone (cf. *Gorgias* 492a). However, there are some pleasures—such as those arising from certain smells, sights and sounds—that are not founded upon a preceding desire. The pleasures of contemplation (*θεωρία*) belong in this category, as do some of the pleasures of learning, such as the pleasure that comes from an unexpected insight (cf. *Philebus* 51b–52a). Since the pleasures of the senses, like the senses themselves, seem to have been reserved by nature for members of the animal kingdom, whose preservation depends as much upon the power of perception as upon the promptings of passion and the capacity for locomotion; and since learning is possible only for an intelligent being whose knowledge is incomplete, it is reasonable to suppose that the sole pleasure of which a self-sufficient being could be capable is that of contemplation. It was of course Aristotle's view that God, even though self-sufficient, is supremely happy, because He enjoys one continuous pleasure, the pleasure of contemplation (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1154^b24–29, 1178^b33–36).

To return to the dialogue, Socrates declines to say whether or not he thinks the gods benefit from our gifts. Instead he wonders what those gifts might be. "What else do you think," Euthyphron replies, "but honor and honorable gifts and—as I said before—gratitude (*χάρις*, 15a10)." What he actually said is that one must

4. Cf. Plato, *Lysis* 210d; *Statesman* 296e–297a.

5. Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.10.

worship the gods in the manner “acceptable” or “gratifying” (*κεχαρισμένον*, 14b2) to them. However, worship is readily intelligible as an expression of gratitude. Gratitude is what we owe to our benefactors, and the gods are thought to be the greatest benefactors. Gratitude, moreover, is intended to be *κεχαρισμένον* in both senses of that word. A benefactor does not expect to receive from his beneficiaries anything comparable in value to the good he does for them. Their gratitude is *acceptable* to him, since he knows it is the best thing they can give him in return. He also finds it *gratifying*, as it assures him they are not unworthy of his efforts. According to Euthyphron, our gifts to the gods are honor, honorable gifts, and gratitude. The point he wants to make, but does not clearly express, is that we show our gratitude to the gods by honoring them, and we honor them chiefly through sacrifice and prayer.

Man naturally feels benevolence and gratitude or enmity and resentment toward whatever he believes benefits him or does him harm. He wants to return good for good and evil for evil. So deeply ingrained in him is this retaliatory principle, that he sometimes attempts to repay the pleasure or pain he receives from an inanimate object. He may kick the door on which he stubbed his toe, or dote fondly on a possession which has become a special source of enjoyment or pride. A moment's reflection informs him, however, that the only proper object of his gratitude or resentment is a moral agent that deliberately intends his good or ill.⁶ Most persons, at one time or another, come to believe they have much to be grateful for. And when this happens, it is usually with an awareness that their greatest blessings cannot all be attributed to a human agency. The belief in gods enables man to gratify his deepest need to give thanks. The gods are a personification of his gratitude as well as of his fears. By subtly calling attention to this fact, Plato concedes that piety is nobler than the argument of the dialogue thus far has suggested. It would be a gross injustice to countless devout persons to assume that behind every act of worship there lies an unconscious desire to domesticate, enslave, or swindle the gods.

XI. Ending of the Dialogue (15b1–16a4)

Euthyphron's remark about gratitude enables Socrates to suggest that the holy is gratifying to the gods but neither beneficial nor dear to them. Euthyphron responds that he thinks the holy is the dearest thing of all. We might have expected him to react in this way. He never doubted that holiness is god-beloved (cf. 11a4–b8); and besides, if the holy is gratifying to the gods, it must also be dear or pleasing (*φίλον*, 15b2) to them. Socrates goes on to infer that Euthyphron now wants to define the holy as that which is dear to the gods. “Most certainly,” the prophet says. Here again his reaction is predictable. He never understood the difference between saying that the holy is god-beloved and defining it as *the* god-

6. Cf. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* 2.3.1–7.

beloved (cf. 10d12–11a9), any more than he understood the distinction between “accident” and “essence” (cf. 11a6–9). Twice in the present exchange Socrates has predetermined Euthyphron’s answer; he has put words in his mouth. Accordingly he now returns to the subject of Daedalus’ art.

Socrates wonders how Euthyphron can be surprised, when he gives such answers, if his speeches appear not to stand fast but walk about. And how can Euthyphron accuse him of being the Daedalus who makes them walk, when he is himself much more artful than Daedalus? For he has made the argument go round in a circle. Or does Euthyphron not perceive that their discussion has come back to the place it started from? Surely he remembers that a while ago the holy and the god-beloved appeared to them not the same but different. Or does he not remember? Euthyphron replies that he does. Then does he not realize he is now asserting that what is dear (*φίλον*), 15c5) to the gods is holy, and is this not equivalent to defining the holy as the god-beloved (*θεοφιλές*, 15c6)? “Of course,” says the prophet. Socrates, we observe, has not only steered Euthyphron down a path that ends in outright self-contradiction; he has pretended to doubt both the soundness of Euthyphron’s memory and his ability to grasp the obvious. He then offers him a choice of confessing to one of two errors: either they blundered earlier in agreeing that the holy and god-beloved are different, or, if they made no mistake then, they must be using the wrong hypothesis now. “So it seems,” Euthyphron says with weary indifference. Socrates thereupon exhorts him to start the inquiry all over again from the beginning. He could hardly say anything better calculated to hasten the prophet’s departure.

Vowing that he will not be cowardly and give up the search before learning what the holy is, Socrates implores Euthyphron not to scorn him, and to make every effort to tell the truth. “For you know [the truth],” says Socrates, “if indeed any human being does, and like Proteus, you are not to be released until you tell.” This remark is undoubtedly supposed to make Euthyphron even more anxious to leave. It is of interest to us for at least two other reasons. First, Socrates implies that true piety is humanly unknowable. For he suggests that one would have to be as wise as Proteus to know what the holy is, and Proteus, the legendary Old Man of the Sea, was a god. The *Euthyphro* is indeed an “aporetic dialogue.” Piety is correct behavior with regard to the divine, but men lack genuine knowledge of the true god or gods.

Second, Socrates alludes to a Homeric tale which provides a clue to Plato’s intention as an author. In the fourth book of the *Odyssey* Menelaos tells the story of his capture of Proteus.¹ He held fast to the Old Man until he agreed to speak. This was no mean feat, as the sea god could change his form at will. In fact, Menelaos would have failed without the help of a goddess, Eidothea. He and his companions had been marooned by windless seas on the isle of Pharos, a barren place where sooner or later they would die of starvation. Menelaos suspected that

1. Homer, *Odyssey* 4.348–480.

a god was responsible for their plight, but he knew neither which deity they had offended nor how to appease him. Proteus could easily answer these questions, but he shunned the presence of men, speaking to them only if he could retain his liberty in no other way. When Menelaos captured him, the Old Man revealed that the hero was being punished for failing to render complete hecatombs to Zeus and the other immortals, but that by offering the proper sacrifices he would be granted a safe passage home.

Socrates characterizes Euthyphron as a Proteus bent on eluding him. He thereby implicitly compares himself to Menelaos. The comparison has a certain plausibility. Like Menelaos on the island, Socrates is in danger of losing his life. And perhaps he would be less vulnerable to the slings and arrows of his accusers if he had been more attentive to the sacrifices.² But the analogy breaks down at crucial points. Menelaos sailed home safely; Socrates will be condemned to death. And Socrates' punishment will be inflicted by the city, not by the gods. Menelaos and Socrates stand at opposite poles of the moral universe. The one epitomizes a visceral attachment to one's own; the other, a reflective love of wisdom. Socrates, we may be sure, would not have advocated war against Troy if Paris had abducted Xanthippe, even had she been the comeliest of women. Homer's poetry, through its beautiful and compelling images of the deeds and sufferings of the heroes, encourages a way of life devoted to the care of one's own body, property, reputation, family, and city. At the same time, and more fundamentally, it provides no ground for a way of life devoted to the pursuit of wisdom. For it presents a world in which nothing is beyond the reach of becoming and change. Proteus' mutability reflects the chaos out of which the Homeric world came into being; it typifies that quality of the Greek gods which Socrates criticizes so severely in the *Republic*.³ Socrates must have been amused, therefore, that Menelaos overcame Proteus with the aid of Eidothea, whose name means "form goddess."⁴ Athens executed Socrates, but he triumphed in death. Through Plato's poetry, he became the hero of the philosophic tradition. And that tradition, which Plato's poetry was so instrumental in founding, itself became a founding element of Western Civilization. Plato could not have secured Socrates' victory over the Homeric heroes if he had not become a poet of new divine things, the "forms." By a strange coincidence, a fitting image of this transvaluation of values was provided by Homer himself.

Socrates now purports to explain why Euthyphron must know the truth about the holy. If Euthyphron did not know clearly what is holy and unholy, he would never have undertaken, on behalf of a mere hireling, to prosecute his aged father for murder. On the contrary, fear of the gods would have kept him from taking

2. Compare *Republic* 327a with 331d6–7; also consider *Phaedo* 118a7–8. The Platonic Socrates prays aloud only once—at *Phaedrus* 279b–c, in a private conversation. His prayer is for wisdom and thus, according to the teaching of the dialogue, for divinity.

3. Plato, *Republic* 380d1–381e5.

4. The meaning of "Eidothea" was pointed out to me by Edward Erler.

the risk that he “might not do it correctly,” and he would have been ashamed before human beings. It is evident, therefore, that he thinks he knows clearly what is holy and what is not.

Having made a final attempt to frighten and shame Euthyphron into abandoning his lawsuit—while hinting that in some circumstances it might be correct to prosecute one’s father (cf. 4a11–b2, 9a1–9)—Socrates urges the prophet to speak and no longer conceal what he considers the holy to be. “Some other time, Socrates,” is the reply. Euthyphron then alleges he is in a hurry to go somewhere and must be on his way. And with that, he departs. Socrates pretends to be surprised and chagrined. He rebukes Euthyphron for casting him down from a mighty hope, namely, that he could learn from him what is holy and what is not, and thereby rid himself of Meletus’ indictment. Socrates thus indirectly accuses Euthyphron of allowing him to be killed. In keeping with this, he tacitly compares himself to the field hand, whom Euthyphron’s father supposedly “cast down” (*καταβαλὼν*, 4c8, 15e5) into a ditch. Of course, Socrates is not seriously suggesting that Euthyphron is guilty of negligent homicide. But this fanciful notion may help us to see that the dialogue has culminated in a triple failure. Not only do Socrates and Euthyphron fail to discover true piety, but each fails to benefit the other. Euthyphron does not save Socrates from the city, nor does Socrates save Euthyphron from himself.

Socrates continues to profess disappointment at the prophet’s departure. By this time Euthyphron may not be able to hear him; he is surely not listening. Socrates says he had hoped to show Meletus that Euthyphron made him wise in divine things, that he no longer speaks loosely or makes innovations in regard to them, and above all that he would live the rest of his life in a better way. With these words the dialogue ends. Socrates’ closing allusion to the problem of how one should live reminds us that, in the decisive respect, the dialogue has been entirely successful. The *Euthyphro* has shown that *νόμος* does not deserve the unqualified respect of the wisest men, and that orthodox piety is not a virtue. It has therefore established the necessity for raising and exploring the question of the right life. And that question is the central and unifying theme of Socratic philosophy.

CONCLUSION

It was observed in the Introduction that we cannot take an intelligent interest in the *Euthyphro* without prejudging Socrates’ quarrel with Athens, and this seemed to cast grave doubts upon the legitimacy of our study. We found it necessary to treat Athens as representative of “the city,” and to assume that we could understand what is important about Athenian piety without ever having practiced it. In so doing we covertly denied the chosenness of any ancient people—its claim to possess a sacred tradition whose significance cannot properly be appre-

ciated from the outside. In short, we assumed that the good is not identical with the ancestral, the very point Socrates is obliged to prove.

Having completed our analysis of the dialogue, we must now try to determine whether the problem just summarized is as serious as it initially appeared to be. Two considerations suggest that it is not.

First, the phenomena from which we inferred the fallibility and delusiveness of νόμος as a guide to action are neither peculiar to Athens nor trivial for being common. On the contrary, they are fundamental features of civil life, Athenian and non-Athenian alike. It will be useful to recall the most important of these, and the key points that were made in connection with them. (1) *The belief that the family is a sacral union.* This belief, which is intimately connected with notions of communal guilt and the heritability of sin, supports both Euthyphron's lawsuit and his kinsmen's opposition to it. For among other things, it implies that although a son is impious if he prosecutes his manslaying father, he may not be able to free himself from pollution unless he prosecutes. (2) *The belief that the elementary rules of justice have been legislated or sanctioned by the gods.* On account of this belief, the tension between loyalty to one's own and the demands of impartial justice—a tension intrinsic to political life as such—tends to assume the form of a contradiction between the commandments of divine law, or of a conflict between justice and piety. (3) *The multiplicity of religious authorities.* In addition to the officially appointed expounders of sacred custom (for example, the King Archon and the Interpreters), every city has its share of oracle chanters, inspired poets, soothsayers, and others who claim to speak for the gods. This state of affairs is bound to occasion some disputes concerning religious duty that cannot be resolved on the basis of authority.

Second, although our initial concern with the dialogue involved a tacit begging of the question, Socrates' refutation of the view that piety is justice to the gods makes use of no illicit hypotheses: his grounds of proof do not presuppose the truth of what is to be proved. One and the same mode of argument enables or compels him to deny that the gods rule us, are served by us, or make covenants with us. In each case the denial follows logically from premises expressly or implicitly accepted by most religious persons everywhere.